

Getting deterrence right?

Evaluation evidence and complementary crime control mechanisms

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In recent years, scholars have begun to argue that police interventions provide an effective approach for gaining both special and general deterrence against crime. A series of experimental and quasi-experimental studies has shown that the police can be effective in preventing crime (Braga, 2001, 2005; Skogan and Frydl, 2004; Weisburd and Eck, 2004), and that such crime prevention benefits are not offset by displacement of crime to areas near to police interventions (Braga, 2001; Weisburd et al., 2006). Durlauf and Nagin (2011: 14) drew from this literature to argue that, “Increasing the visibility of the police by hiring more officers and by allocating existing officers in ways that heighten the perceived risk of apprehension consistently seem to have substantial marginal deterrent effects.” Indeed, they concluded that crime prevention in the United States would be improved by shifting resources from imprisonment to policing.

A recent innovation in policing that capitalizes on the growing evidence of the effectiveness of police deterrence strategies is the “focused deterrence” framework, which is often referred to as “pulling-levers policing” (Kennedy, 1998, 2008). Pioneered in Boston as a problem-oriented policing project to halt serious gang violence during the 1990s (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, and Piehl, 2001), the focused deterrence framework has been applied in many U.S. cities through federally sponsored violence-prevention programs such as the Strategic Alternatives to Community Safety Initiative and Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) (Dalton, 2002). Focused deterrence strategies honor core deterrence ideas, such as increasing risks faced by offenders, while finding new and creative ways of deploying

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traditional and nontraditional law enforcement tools to do so, such as communicating incentives and disincentives directly to targeted offenders (Kennedy, 1998, 2008). The High Point Drug Market Intervention (DMI) applied focused deterrence principles to overt drug market problems and Corsaro, Hunt, Kroovand Hipple, and McGarrell (2012, this issue) report positive crime control gains associated with the approach.

The evaluation evidence on the crime control value of the focused deterrence approach, particularly its first application to control gang violence in Boston known as Operation Ceasefire, has received some healthy skepticism (see, e.g., Fagan, 2002; Rosenfeld, Fornango, and Baumer, 2005). In a recent article in *The New Yorker* (Seabrook, 2009: 37), well-respected deterrence scholar Professor Franklin Zimring lamented the lack of rigorous evaluations of this new crime control strategy and, when assessing the Boston experience, stated, "Ceasefire is more of a theory of treatment rather than a proven strategy." Although there has been some scholarly support for the potential efficacy of these new approaches (see, e.g., Cook and Ludwig, 2006; Durlauf and Nagin, 2011), many critics seem to be unaware of the growing body of evidence showing that focused deterrence strategies, such as Boston's Ceasefire and High Point's DMI, do indeed generate noteworthy crime control benefits.

The evaluation evidence, however, needs further development. Most concerning is that the available evaluation literature does not provide much insight on why these programs seem to work in practice. Even a casual reader of the various focused deterrence program descriptions would note that there seems to be additional crime control mechanisms at work beyond straight-up deterrence. Corsaro et al. (2012) explicitly acknowledge the possibility that other prevention frameworks, such as community social control and procedural fairness, might help explain the observed impacts of the High Point DMI on violent crime. As such, this policy essay briefly summarizes the existing evaluation evidence and explores some complementary mechanisms that might account for some of the observed crime reduction effects.

The Existing Evaluation Evidence

The available scientific evidence on the crime reduction value of focused deterrence strategies has been characterized previously as "promising" but "descriptive rather than evaluative" (Skogan and Frydl, 2004: 241) and as "limited" but "still evolving" (Wellford, Pepper, and Petrie, 2005: 10) by the U.S. National Research Council's Committee to Review Research on Police Policy and Practices and the Committee to Improve Research Information and Data on Firearms, respectively. A recently completed Campbell Collaboration systematic review identified 11 evaluations of focused deterrence strategies that used comparison groups (Braga and Weisburd, 2011); nine of these evaluations were completed after the National Research Council reports were published. Six studies evaluated the crime reduction effects of focused deterrence strategies on serious violence generated by street gangs or criminally

active street groups (Boston, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Lowell, and Stockton). Two studies evaluated strategies focused on reducing crime driven by street-level drug markets (Nashville and Rockford), and three evaluated crime reduction strategies that were focused on individual repeat offenders (Chicago, Honolulu, and Newark). Ten evaluations used quasi-experimental research designs of varying rigor, and only one used a randomized controlled trial design. A better-developed base of scientific evidence now exists to assess whether crime prevention impacts are associated with this approach.

Ten of eleven eligible studies reported strong and statistically significant crime reductions associated with the focused deterrence strategy. The Campbell review meta-analysis suggested that focused deterrence strategies are associated with an overall statistically significant, medium-sized crime reduction effect. Only one study did not report a notable crime prevention benefit. In Newark, NJ (Boyle, Lanterman, Pascarella, and Cheng, 2010), a quasi-experimental evaluation reported a non-statistically significant reduction in gunshot injuries associated with a strategy that blended the law enforcement actions developed by the Boston Ceasefire pulling levers strategy with the public health violence prevention activities developed by CeaseFire Chicago (Skogan, Hartnett, Bump, and DuBois, 2008). Although it is not clear why the Newark program failed to generate larger impacts on gun violence, growing evaluation evidence suggests that the CeaseFire Chicago community-driven violence reduction approach, with its premium on gang violence mediation and negotiation work by “violence interrupters,” might not produce the desired violence prevention benefits (see Papachristos, 2011).

The High Point DMI quasi-experimental evaluation (Corsaro et al., 2012) joins this developing body of evaluation evidence.¹ The Campbell review identified two other quasi-experimental evaluations of the DMI approach. Corsaro, Brunson, and McGarrell (2010) reported that a DMI strategy targeting an illegal drug market operating in the McFerrin Park neighborhood of Nashville, TN, was associated with statistically significant reductions in drug and property offenses. The evaluation also suggested that the DMI intervention was associated with a noteworthy diffusion of crime control benefits to adjoining areas beyond the McFerrin Park target neighborhood. The same research team also evaluated a DMI program focused on an illegal drug market in the Delancey Heights neighborhood of Rockford, IL, and reported statistically significant reductions in property, drug, and nuisance crimes (Corsaro, Brunson, and McGarrell, 2009).

Similar to other investigations of prevention effects reported by crime and justice studies (Weisburd, Lum, and Petrosino, 2001; Welsh, Peel, Farrington, Elffers, and Braga, 2011), Braga and Weisburd (2011) also found that the strongest program effect sizes were generated by evaluations that used the weakest quasi-experimental research designs.

1. The High Point DMI evaluation (Corsaro et al., 2012) was not available when the search for eligible strategies was completed for the Campbell Collaboration review. It will be included when the review is updated.

However, positive effect sizes were evidenced in those studies using strong comparison groups (e.g., Papachristos, Meares, and Fagan, 2007) and in the sole randomized controlled trial (Hawken and Kleiman, 2009).² Even if we assume that the observed effects contained some degree of upward bias, it seems that the overall impact of such programs is noteworthy. These findings are certainly encouraging and point to the promises of the focused deterrence approach.

The positive outcomes of the existing body of evaluations indicate that additional experimental evaluations, however difficult and costly, are warranted. The potential barriers are real, especially in regard to identifying valid treatment and comparison areas. But existing evidence is strong enough to warrant a large investment in multisite experiments (Weisburd and Taxman, 2000). Such experiments could solve the problem of small numbers of places in single jurisdictions and would allow for examination of variation in effectiveness across contexts.

Complementary Crime Control Mechanisms

In his discussion of pulling levers strategies, David M. Kennedy (1998: 8) suggested, “remarkably, it may be that a key aspect of getting the deterrence equation right is simply communicating directly with the last group that is usually considered for inclusion in crime control strategies: offenders themselves.” The available research has suggested that deterrent effects are ultimately determined by offender perceptions of sanction risk and certainty (Nagin, 1998). Focused deterrence strategies are targeted on specific behaviors by a relatively small number of chronic offenders who are highly vulnerable to criminal justice sanctions. The approach directly confronts offenders and informs them that continued offending will not be tolerated and how the system will respond to violations of these new behavior standards. Face-to-face meetings with offenders are an important first step in altering their perceptions about sanction risk (Horney and Marshall, 1992; Nagin, 1998). As McGarrell, Chermak, Wilson, and Corsaro (2006) suggested, direct communications and affirmative follow-up responses are the types of new information that might cause offenders to reassess the risks of committing crimes.

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2. The Hawaii Opportunity with Probation Enforcement (HOPE) intervention was a community supervision program aimed at substance-abusing probationers (Hawken and Kleiman, 2009). The program relied on a mandate to abstain from illicit drugs, backed by swift and certain sanctions for drug test failures and preceded by a clear and direct warning. Probationers were sentenced to drug treatment only if they continued to test positive for drug use or if they requested a treatment referral. The deterrence-based HOPE intervention differs significantly from typical drug court operations as it economizes on treatment and court resources. As Hawken and Kleiman (2009) suggested, HOPE does not mandate formal treatment for every probationer and does not require regularly scheduled meetings with a judge; probationers appear before a judge only when they have violated a rule. HOPE is often linked to the DMI approaches as a related application of focused deterrence (see, e.g., Boyum, Caulkins, and Kleiman, 2011) as well as gang- and group-based pulling levers focused deterrence based on the common strategy of certain punishment for offenders (Durlauf and Nagin, 2011).

Although the results of the Campbell Collaboration review (Braga and Weisburd, 2011) and the new Corsaro et al. (2012) evaluation are supportive of deterrence principles, it seems likely that other complementary crime control mechanisms are at work in the focused deterrence strategies described here that need to be highlighted and better understood. In Durlauf and Nagin's (2011) article, the focus is on the possibilities for increasing perceived risk and deterrence by increasing police presence. Although this conclusion is warranted by the data and represents an important component of the causal mechanisms that have increased the effectiveness of focused deterrence strategies, it might miss an important part of the story. In the focused deterrence approach, the emphasis is not only on increasing the risk of offending but also on decreasing opportunity structures for violence, deflecting offenders away from crime, increasing the collective efficacy of communities, and increasing the legitimacy of police actions. Indeed, it seems likely that the observed crime control gains come precisely from the multifaceted ways in which this program influences criminals.

Several scholars have focused on the mechanism of "discouragement" when discussing the crime prevention benefits of interventions (see, e.g., Clarke and Weisburd, 1994). Discouragement emphasizes decreasing the opportunities for crime and increasing the alternative opportunity structures for offenders. In this context, situational crime prevention techniques often are implemented as part of the core pulling levers work in focused deterrence strategies (Braga and Kennedy, 2012; Skubak Tillyer and Kennedy, 2008). For instance, the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence gang-violence-reduction-focused deterrence strategy used civil forfeiture techniques to close down a highly problematic bar that generated recurring serious violence (Engel, Corsaro, and Skubak Tillyer, 2010). Extending guardianship, assisting natural surveillance, strengthening formal surveillance, reducing the anonymity of offenders, and using place managers can greatly enhance the range and the quality of the varying enforcement and regulatory levers that can be pulled on offending groups and key actors in criminal networks. The focused deterrence approach also seeks to redirect offenders away from violent crime through the provision of social services and opportunities. In all the gang/group interventions reviewed by Braga and Weisburd (2011), gang members were offered job training, employment, substance abuse treatment, housing assistance, and a variety of other services and opportunities.

Some aspects of "broken windows" theory also may be relevant for our understanding of how and why focused deterrence programs reduce crime (Wilson and Kelling, 1982). Broken windows theory argues that intensive efforts by police to reduce social and physical disorder can reverse the breakdown of community social controls that accompanies untended and unrestrained violations of social order. Thus, crime is reduced in part because of efforts by the police and in part because of increased vigilance by community members. Kleiman and Smith (1990: 88) described the potential benefits of an intensive police effort to reduce drug crime and disorder by noting "a dramatic police effort may call forth increased

neighborhood efforts at self-protection against drug dealing activity; given police resources such self-defense may be essential to long-run control of drug dealing.”

Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) emphasized the capacity of a community to realize common values and to regulate behavior within it through cohesive relationships and mutual trust among residents. They argued that the key factor determining whether crime will flourish is a sense of the “collective efficacy” of a community. A community with strong collective efficacy is characterized by “high capacities for collective action for the public good” (St. Jean, 2007: 3). Focused deterrence enhances collective efficacy in communities by emphasizing the importance of engaging and enlisting community members in the strategies developed. The High Point DMI strategy, for example, drew on collective efficacy principles by engaging family, friends, and other “influential” community members in addressing the criminal behaviors of local drug dealers (Corsaro et al., 2012).

Finally, the focused deterrence approach takes advantage of recent theorizing regarding procedural justice and legitimacy. The effectiveness of policing is dependent on public perceptions of the legitimacy of police actions (Skogan and Frydl, 2004; Tyler, 1990, 2004). Legitimacy is the public belief that there is a responsibility and obligation to accept voluntarily and defer to the decisions made by authorities (Tyler, 1990, 2004). Recent studies have suggested that when procedural justice approaches are used by the police, citizens not only will evaluate the legitimacy of the police more highly but also will be more likely to obey the law in the future (see, e.g., Paternoster et al., 1997). Advocates of focused deterrence strategies argue that targeted offenders should be treated with respect and dignity (Kennedy, 2008), reflecting procedural justice principles. The Chicago PSN strategy, for instance, sought to increase the likelihood that the offenders would “buy in” and comply voluntarily with the prosocial, antiviolence norms being advocated by interacting with offenders in ways that enhance procedural justice in their communication sessions (Papachristos et al., 2007).

At this point, the Chicago PSN quasi-experiment is the only evaluation that has attempted to isolate the effects of key program elements that comprised a focused deterrence strategy (Papachristos et al., 2007). The research team analyzed the overall effects of the PSN treatment as well as the four interventions that made up the PSN treatment:

1. Increased federal prosecutions for convicted felons carrying or using guns
2. The length of sentences associated with federal prosecutions
3. Supply-side firearm policing activities (gun recoveries by police gun teams)
4. Social marketing of deterrence and social norms messages through justice-style offender notification meetings

In these offender notification meetings, randomly selected gun- and gang-involved, recently released former prison inmates returning to the treatment districts were informed of their vulnerability as felons to federal firearms laws, with stiff mandatory minimum

sentences; were offered social services; and were addressed by community members and ex-offenders.

Papachristos et al. (2007) found that the overall PSN treatment was associated with a statistically significant 37% reduction in the number of homicides in the treatment district relative to the control districts. The specific PSN intervention that generated the largest, statistically significant effect on decreased homicide in the treatment districts relative to control districts was the offender notification forums. In short, the greater the proportion of offenders who attended the forums, the greater the decline in treatment district levels of homicide. Increased federal prosecutions and the number of guns recovered by the gun teams were associated with modest but statistically significant declines in homicides in the treatment districts relative to the control districts. Getting more guns off the street and prosecuting more offenders federally for gun crimes were associated with small but meaningful homicide decreases. The length of sentences associated with federal prosecutions was not associated with the observed homicide decreases.

Concluding Remarks

Focused deterrence strategies, such as High Point's DMI and Boston's Ceasefire, are a recent addition to the existing scholarly literature on crime control and prevention strategies. Although the evaluation evidence needs to be strengthened and the theoretical underpinnings of the approach need refinement, jurisdictions suffering from gang violence, overt drug markets, and repeat offender problems should add focused deterrence strategies to their existing portfolio of prevention and control interventions. The existing evidence suggests these new approaches to crime prevention and control generate crime reductions.

At the same, however, jurisdictions looking to implement focused deterrence programs need guidance on the key operational elements of these varied approaches. The Chicago PSN evaluation suggested that direct communications with offenders in a procedurally just manner and maintaining an enforcement environment that increases the risk of apprehension and prosecution are important elements. It seems likely that there are other key elements. As evaluation evidence and practical experience continues to accumulate, a premium must be placed on identifying these complementary crime control mechanisms and on isolating their impacts on targeted crime problems.

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